

White Cargo 13

Last time, we heard how Jennifer had fallen in love with a young Indian actor, Shashi Kapoor, and trouble was brewing between the young couple and Geoffrey, who was terrified of losing her.

A temporary respite came with a booking for the company in Singapore, but the season turned out to be a disappointment as money was not forthcoming, and Geoffrey took extra bookings in ghastly places. The only bright point was the old Danish couple running the hotel where the company was staying – wonderful humanitarians who devoted their lives to rescuing distressed animals – and people!

Episode 13.

The atmosphere in the company was getting worse. The usual camaraderie, the jokes and repartee were becoming thin on the ground. Money was in short supply, so there was little opportunity to escape into the town. Most of the time we were forced together, day and night.

Worst of all, it was clear that Jennifer was planning to leave with Shashi sooner rather than later, and Geoffrey's possessiveness was approaching fever pitch. He was so antagonistic towards Shashi that he would only speak to him through a go-between – usually me.

Geoffrey had been the same with every boyfriend Jennifer had ever had who was serious enough to represent the possibility of her having a life apart from the family. His behaviour was nothing new, but to Shashi it must have seemed intolerable.

When, one morning at breakfast, Geoffrey said to me, 'Ask the man over there if he thinks he and my daughter will allow us to book some plays in Penang next month,' I knew things couldn't get much worse. At the next performance Geoffrey managed to get through the entire play without once looking at his future son-in-law. It was most unlike him to be so unprofessional. After this particularly hostile display, Jennifer decided that things were unbearable. She announced in a shaky voice at the morning meeting that the following weekend she would be flying to Bombay with Shashi to get married.

Geoffrey went white and left the room. A few moments later, Mother followed. I did not understand my father's objection, nor Mother's refusal to take my sister's side. Until he decided to marry into our family we had all adored Shashi. But I did not want to lose my sister and so, with conflicting emotions, I would listen long into the night to my parents' vitriolic objections to this love match.

Geoffrey and Laura argued, it seemed to me, all night, every night, from the moment they knew Jennifer was going until the morning she left.

Recriminations, blame, insults about the couple and each other. Geoffrey's jealousy had caused a catastrophic personality change. His sense of humour deserted him entirely and he started to drink heavily. I would beg them in tears not to row, and more than that, not to call Jennifer a tart and a fool. This kind of language was not unusual, but it was the way they shouted, the way they both drank five and six too many whiskies.

As Geoffrey got more and more drunk, he would become more and more objectionable, shouting so loudly that he set the dogs barking. This would be followed by Mother's ssshhh, which made him even more livid, and he would become violent, usually towards a table, but more than once towards her. I was ashamed of my parents and their tawdry behaviour.

The morning of Jennifer's departure came as a relief. None of us had slept a wink the night before: Jennifer, because she was crying; my parents because they were rowing, each blaming the other for the loss of their child. 'I never want to see her face again,' Geoffrey had yelled at Mother the night before.

And when we stood on the veranda that morning and Jennifer, red-eyed, threw her arms about his neck, he stood, stiff and straight, his arms to his sides, looking ahead and silent, until I pulled her away from him and hugged her into the waiting taxi. The bewilderment on Shashi's face at this appalling behaviour is something I will never forget.

I've been going through some of your letters. There's a lot about Jennifer dying. Funny how death numbs the senses: these letters are more moving now than in the fresh shock of her death. The funeral was a kind of appalling dream.

It took place in a little chapel in Golders Green Crematorium, but with no religious ceremony to go with it. A confused priest was unable to help as he was not allowed to be priest-like: Jennifer being agnostic, Shashi Hindu, my parents converted Catholics and me a converted Jew, none of us wanted to take responsibility for the wrath of the wrong god raining down from the heavens.

The service, if you could call it that, consisted of my reading the sonnet 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' and Geoffrey reading another sonnet, followed by the last words she wrote, scrawled on a piece of paper and given to him at the hospital two days before she died: 'The readiness is all.'

Quoting Shakespeare to the last.

How different it would have been at a Hindu ghat. In Bombay it would have been by the sea, the funeral pyre piled high with sandalwood and scented logs. The body, wrapped in a simple white cotton shroud and adorned with jasmine, marigold and roses, would be placed by the menfolk gently on top of the pyre, then covered with perfumed oil and more flowers. Prayers would be said and the eldest son would light the fire as the sun set. There would be open, uninhibited tears of grief, and acceptance of the cycle of life and death. To some I know it seems a macabre way to end, but compared with the shyness and embarrassment evident in European culture, it seems preferable and more healing.

Jennifer had left the company and the strain continued for months. We went across the causeway to Johor Baharu and into Malaya. In Sibu matters came to a head between Geoffrey and Laura in what came to be known as 'the cheongsam episode'.

Generally, Mother's loyalty and devotion were astonishing. Even though they rowed like cat and dog, they always made up and in public presented a united front. But while she was cool and composed on the surface, underneath lurked a demon temper and a jealous temperament. She would brook no

rival, and once, in front of the whole company, told a young actress that if she continued 'to make eyes at Geoff in that soppy manner', she would be sacked. In Malaya, this side of her personality burst out again.

Geoffrey did have a tendency to frequent bars, and in Malaya bars come equipped with pretty girls with long black hair, exquisite figures and dazzling smiles. Geoffrey started taking longer and longer over his nightcap in our seedy hotel, lingering in the bar with the ladies of the night.

One night I was woken by great thuds coming from the next room. This then gave way to the sound of Mother crying. I knocked sheepishly on the door and went in. I was told to go back to my room by a wild-looking Geoffrey, while Mother dashed into the bathroom. I learned the next morning that, fed up with Geoffrey's behaviour, Mother had procured for herself a skintight, red satin cheongsam. Squeezed into this dress, slit up to her waist, and wearing her hair piled up, black eyeliner to emphasize her already oriental features, and red lipstick, she tottered down to the bar on high heels. Perching herself on a bar stool, she proceeded to smoke from a long cigarette holder and ply her trade. Geoffrey, being of an equally jealous disposition, blew several gaskets and ended up giving her a bloody nose.

For a few months after that he became her slave, and when he started shouting she would simply touch her nose and give him a look, and he would stop in his tracks. They continued to row – it was a way of life for them – but she had made the point that he had gone too far.

This unseemly episode seemed to be one more step in the decline of the company. Things had changed, both within and without. Nothing seemed to work well, and I was growing up and straining at the family leash.

I found time for day-dreaming and falling in love. This I started to do regularly, whenever we stayed long enough for me to see the same boy twice. But our moving on always seemed to coincide exactly with escalating ardour, and so I remained very innocent of boys and what they were until I was an overblown fourteen.

Meanwhile, the backlash from Jennifer's departure continued. It would be a year before the family was reconciled to the fact that she had gone.

She married Shashi in Bombay in a Hindu wedding, surrounded by Shashi's relatives and friends. The ceremony was traditional, with flowers and chanting, rituals and blessings. She was deeply in love with her new husband and with India, and she felt a profound sadness that her own parents, who had brought her to this land with such joy, should withdraw their good wishes for her marriage.

I think that I would never have forgiven them, but she knew them well and hoped that time would help. And she was right: it did. In the meantime we were a depleted bunch adrift in Singapore. We managed to limp on with various cut versions of the texts, but the lack of funds became acute. We did not have enough for the fare back to India.

Undaunted, Geoffrey organized a show at a small concert hall. How he got it for free I don't know, but we painted posters and drew leaflets and walked the streets for the next few days, handing them out to unsuspecting pedestrians. The show was *She Stoops to Conquer* and the admission was advertised as free. To our surprise we played to a full house, then to the audience's surprise Geoffrey made a speech at the end of the play, declaring that we were stranded and needed our return fare. Hats would be passed round and

we would be most grateful for any contributions. It was at moments such as this that I wished to belong to a completely different set of parents. Humiliation sat heavily on my shoulders. I did not see Geoffrey's ingenuity in organizing the situation and bravery in dealing with it.

The audience was generous, but not quite bountiful enough for us to get to India. So we went to Borneo instead.

After a typically eventful tour of Borneo and Sarawak, Geoffrey's good humour returned. He loved Sarawak; we played with some success. We were once more in a land that was starved of entertainment, and valued for turning up at all. We were overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the place, unspoilt and undiscovered. It was a happy time and a healing time. We finally returned to India refreshed.

Then Jennifer had her first child, a glorious little boy. She brought him to Delhi to meet his grandparents and the rift was healed overnight. It was not long before she joined the company again and played in some of the shows, although her return was only temporary. Shashi also joined us for the odd guest appearance, driving the schoolgirls into a frenzy. He was fast becoming one of the biggest stars of the Bombay talkies, with producers begging him to take on additional films and work double and triple shifts. With Kunal, Jennifer's little son, we all went to Hong Kong for a tour of the schools. It was a tremendously good visit and some money was made – enough to pay back some loans and continue, yet again, to the next place. We returned to India, then to Malaya, we toured India once again. Some of the old rhythm was returning.

But another departure was upon us. Brian had finally decided, after nearly nine years, that it was time to go home. He had first joined Shakespeareana when I was a toddler, and his leaving marked a sea change. With Brian gone, and Jennifer only visiting, the company was never to be the same again.

But we were soon to be joined by someone else. Ralph Pixton, a British tea planter, very tall and very pukka sahib, had a great sense of humour and an even greater taste for adventure. He had no formal drama training, but asked if he could join us. Geoffrey could never resist people who offered themselves to him, so Ralph gave his notice to his plantation bosses – who thought he had had too much sun – sold off his belongings, and joined us in Poona a month later.

He was extremely laid back and suffered from none of the nerves and neuroses common to most actors. While this stood him in good stead for our vagabond lifestyle, it gave him a bumpy ride at the outset.

The crisis came one evening during *Hamlet*. I was a pubescent Ophelia, to my father's ageing Hamlet. Ralph, on his second night as Polonius, was doing fine. All went well until the scene where Polonius is supposed to spy on the couple, and Hamlet demands of Ophelia, 'Where's your father?' Although Polonius doesn't enter here, he is supposed to be listening. By some sixth sense, Geoffrey knew the man was 'off', which indeed he wasRalph was in the dressing room.

Without much ado, Hamlet dropped Ophelia's hand, strode into the wings, and at the top of his voice shouted, 'Where the bloody hell are you? You stupid fat fart....you're FIRED!' He then made a flourishing re-entrance, and

looking daggers into my eyes in case I laughed, continued with 'Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house. Farewell.'

Geoffrey's fury was spent by the next scene, and Ralph, being Ralph, forgave him the public insult, and settled down to become one of the most dedicated members of the Firm for the next three years.

End of episode 13